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ABSTRACT

Far too few people are able to achieve literacy, with greatest inequalities found between industrialized and developing nations. Gaps are found within each country, including Sweden, where all have the same formal right to knowledge, but in practice, social class distinctions differentiate individuals. Sweden has a common goal of an increased and expanded literacy rate, but people speak of literacy using different concepts and theories. The goals and boundaries of the International Literacy Year (ILY) should be broadened to include numeracy, cultural heritage and national traditions, active citizenship, and the craftsmanship and skills of the labor force. During the ILY, the National Board of Education, county boards of education, and local authorities have actively worked towards the goal of better reading and writing abilities among young people and adults and they have published reports and publications on the results. The ILY has been an occasion to develop pedagogical and didactic perspectives. The focus of the ILY is a question of: (1) the right to education; (2) avoidance of the creation of new gaps in an information society; and (3) giving of priority to women and children. (YLB)

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The International Literacy Year in Sweden
A Journey Through a Changing Landscape[*]

by Kenneth Abrahamsson

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1. To Read is to Travel Across an Open Landscape

Reading is like a journey or a voyage in and out of different worlds. A good library is like a railway station. You can buy a ticket to take you to in any direction and to any culture. The whole world lies at your feet. You can find answers to questions from the daily life of an ant to the latest developments in the field of space research. We can also learn more about the rights and responsibilities a citizen has in an ever-changing society.

A journey also includes travelling past various landscapes, seeing the way people spend their daily lives and watching different cultures pass by like small glimpses of life on the other side of a train window, smudged by miles and miles of time and distance. But travelling is also an excellent way of reading; it affords privacy without the stigma of exclusion, and it provokes thought and insight when words are in need of deeper reflection. If we use this image in a broader sense we can see the *United Nations International Literacy Year* as a many-facetted train of knowledge with a great number of carriages.[1]

We also know that there is a timetable that must be read; all people on this planet should be able to read by the time the next century comes around. It is a journey where we will pass many stations and where we do not know where we will finally stop. Will we have enough engines to pull the train? Will there be enough carriages for all citizens or will we have to buy first, second and third-class tickets? Are there enough experienced engine-drivers and train personnel? Do we have enough reading material? And last, but not least, do the passengers have the motivation that is needed for the trip? We have no proper answers to many of the above questions.

There are far too few who can acquire a ticket to this train of knowledge. The greatest inequalities are to be found between industrialized countries and the Third World, especially within the least developed countries. Great gaps can also be found within each country. In modern-day Sweden, all young people and adults have the same formal right to knowledge. This right has recently been reconfirmed in a new act of legislation stressing the equal rights of all citizens as well as respect and care for our environment. But in practice, their "tickets" entitle them to different classes. Some passengers have to travel second or third-class. For others there is not even room on the train, or they lack motivation to learn in their present life context.

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[*] This paper comprises some personal reflections on the value of the International Literacy Year in Sweden. A more systematic description of the ILY-90 in Sweden will be published by the Swedish National Committee for the International Literacy Year.

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Oftentimes the life-story of a single person can tell more than thousands and thousands of statistics and numbers. While taking part in the Book Trade Fair in Gothenburg in September, 1990, I met a teacher of basic education for adults who was expecting a new pupil - a visually handicapped adult from a North African country. The man, who was about twenty years of age, could neither read nor write, and he had just embarked on the most important journey of his life. The teacher was enthusiastic, but also grappled with a lot of methodological problems. Should training in literacy be in the man's mother tongue, Arabic, or should she use French or even Swedish? Would Braille be a viable method? What extra materials were available in the library for visually handicapped?

Beyond the pedagogical and methodological problems there were even greater difficulties. What was the man's concept of the world around him? How did his concept rhyme with our concept and the teacher's concept? By reflecting in this manner we see that the great challenge of the International Literacy Year can be mirrored in the quiet glance of one single individual.

2. The Different Carriages on the Train of Literacy

During Literacy Year 1990 every country has set off on their own train of literacy with various kinds of carriages and compartments with different types of passengers. The large number of heavy carriages is pulled slowly up winding hillside tracks in the same way as diesel engines pull their carriages through the Rocky Mountains. These literacy trains are pulling the greatest load, namely a global literacy catastrophe where almost 1,000,000,000 people in the world are incapable of reading and writing, or would be regarded as being semi-literate.

In a Swedish setting there are other carriages with various passengers who are discussing what can be done to further promote the importance of reading for development of young people and what efforts can be made to help both young people and adults with difficulties in literacy. There are different groups of passengers travelling in these carriages, but with a common destination - an increased and expanded rate of literacy - but these passengers sometimes speak of language using different languages.

There are process-focussed teachers of reading and writing, there are specialists dealing in international comparisons of literacy and there are groups of people who are chiefly interested in how malfunctions in the brain contribute to reading and writing disabilities among different groups of people. Some groups of passengers favour the use of the word *dyslexia*; others see red as soon as they hear the word.

Those passengers who don't seem to have reserved a seat on the train and who walk around without having anywhere to sit down are those belonging to groups like Swedish FMLS (tr. Better Reading and Writing Assoc.). These passengers can sometimes end up in the cold air between the carriages when the discussion level starts to get heated. They are sent back and forth between various experts who think they themselves know best, who invite them in to their carriages "guaranteeing good results..."

What these passengers really want is to have their right to knowledge sanctioned and supported, to be afforded acceptable social, pedagogical and economic conditions and not to be guinea pigs in a laboratory for various pedagogical schools of thought.

I could easily describe many of the carriages on this train which passes by the Swedish knowledge-oriented society at increasing speed. There are young people with reading difficulties, there are immigrants with a lack of proper education and there are of course adults with functional disabilities of different kinds. There is also a feeling of hope and confidence that people will be able to find ways of conversing and communicating when written language does not suffice. We see a revival of the narrative tradition, sign language, song and music, i.e. a communicative combination involving the complete person and personality.

But the International Literacy Year can also be depicted as an inner journey, an expedition in one's own world, a journey where the doors to knowledge are opened in different ways for different groups of individuals - a journey where the way is just as important as the means of arriving at a certain station.

3. A Broadening of the Goals and Boundaries of the Literacy Year!

Since the train is painted in the colours of literacy, one might ask how many carriages in each country carry passengers set out for destinations such as writing ability, the ability to voice one's own opinion or even the ability to listen. Numeracy is also a basic ability, and in this context it seems not to have been allotted as many carriages as it deserves.

Looking back at history once more, we can see that there is much to be said for the fact that the ability to write has been just as important as the ability to read where productivity, civic development and culture are concerned. Reading and writing as basic skills are not only decisive factors for productive elements in society. They are important implements for the strengthening and development of our civilization, our cultural heritage along with our values and fundamental social ideals.

The International Literacy Year cannot be reduced simply to a question concerning methodological approaches to reading training or action programmes for young people and adults with reading and writing disabilities. In a broader sense it should cover a wide range of culture from international solidarity, cultural heritage and national traditions, active citizenship, the craftsmanship and skills of the labour force, the ability to read and write and also the care for the weak and vulnerable groups in society.

4. The International Literacy Year as a Catalyst for our Educational Realities

In Sweden, the National Board of Education, the county boards of education and local authorities have all actively and systematically worked towards the goal of better reading and writing abilities among young people and adults. A current and summarizing account of this work was published during the autumn of 1990 as part of publication entitled *Om grundläggande kunskaper och färdigheter i en skola för alla* (tr. On Basic Knowledge and Skills in a School for All) This publication is written in the spirit of the Literacy Year without bearing its motto or logotype.

Around the same time the national literacy committee and the NBE published the booklet entitled *Att läsa - en nyckel till många världar* (tr. Reading - A key to Many Worlds) where the background of the Literacy Year is presented. Most of the publication is devoted partly to the importance of meaningful and purposeful reading and writing and partly to what can be done for young people and especially adults with reading and writing disabilities. Both publications complement each other and are now available to educators, principals and teachers.

It should also be pointed out that a number of other reports and publications have been published during the Literacy Year. They concern both the reading habits of young people, reading at the workplace, attempts to solve the reading and writing problems of adults, etc. Furthermore, *Utbildningsradion*, the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company, has produced extensive materials in the form of TV and radio programmes along with various publications concerning the delights and difficulties of reading. This material is presented in a special article as part of the above-named booklet *Att läsa - en nyckel till olika världar*. On the local scene, both city authorities and libraries have taken many new initiatives. The different activities at the national and community levels will be described in a series of reports from the Swedish National Committee for the International Literacy year.

The International Literacy Year has received a good deal of attention in Sweden. This can be seen by the frequent number of articles in the mass media.

A Literacy Year cannot, of course, replace attempts that would otherwise have been made within an area, but it can pose important questions needed for a strategic discussion. Therefore, the Literacy Year is also an occasion to concretize and develop pedagogical and didactic perspectives such as:

to arrive at a broader knowledge of the methods and variations of learning to read and write,

to illustrate various efforts, contributions and possibilities of development for different groups of young people and adults with special reading and writing disabilities or whose ability to communicate is hampered by diverse functional impediments,

to analyze more deeply the connection between literacy and numeracy and also which general knowledge and basic skills a citizen needs in one of the Nordic welfare-oriented societies,

to observe especially the great import and meaning of experiential reading for the imparting culture, solidarity and personal development,

to widen the concept of literacy so that it includes making a citizen more capable of actively and critically comprehending and using all the old and new types of media which he or she comes into contact with,

to deepen both perspective and working methods in the way both school and adult education present development in the Third World and the connection between the lack of literacy and other social conditions.

5. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the Literacy Year concerns goals, quality and development in various countries' educational systems. In this way it spans over a considerably wide range of areas, from disturbances in brain function and how they can cause reading and writing disabilities in children to those economic, social and political factors which have contributed to the fact that many children in the Third World are not even allowed to begin school. The Literacy Year is therefore also a question of the right to education for young people and adults.

A society which cannot guarantee all citizens this right is a handicapped society. Today, our landscape of information in the industrialized countries takes on a new shape, a grey zone with increased space for market-oriented solutions at the expense of the service once afforded by the public sector. Many of the services offered by civic institutions will now cost the user a certain fee. At this point in time there are heated discussions taking place whether or not books should be considered a right or a piece of merchandise. The future challenge does not lie in the formulation of "good learning rights" for all citizens, but rather to what extent public and private institutions will fulfill their obligation to provide learning opportunities for all citizens.

Another threat or challenge is to be found in modern communication technology. The new satellite "fall-out" of mainly action or show business-oriented programming is one side of the coin. The other side is the rapid development of new technology - fax, electronic mail, video, etc. presents an important challenge for future civic information. And here it is of vital importance that one must be aware of new developments and make serious attempts in the future to avoid creating new gaps between various groups in an information society, especially concerning neglected adults in different walks of life. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that "trains of knowledge" in different countries let all passengers on board, irrespective of their social, economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

And last, but not least. As far as the situation in many countries is concerned, special-priority tickets should be given to women and children.

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[1] The ILY-90 has also been a global journey in another sense. A number of meetings, conferences and workshops have taken place. In my position as a research secretary for adult education at the NBE and also as a member of the Swedish ILY-90 committee, I have been privileged to take part in a number of these meetings. The year started with the International Council of Adult Education's World Assembly at the Thai Open University, outside Bangkok in January, 1990. During the spring, a number of national meetings and conferences took place in Sweden.

Last summer, Sweden was the host country for the IRA and the IFLA World Conventions (International Reading Association and International Federation of Library Associations). Early in September, I joined the Swedish delegation to the 42nd International Conference in Geneva. In November, I took part in a Finnish ILY-conference and also a joint meeting in Hamburg between the UNESCO institute and an group of experts from the CERI/OECD. Finally, in December, a Swedish conference was organized to promote interests and resources for adults with functional disabilities.

Thus, 1990 has been for me personally, one long journey through a global and Swedish landscape of literacy and learning - a journey where I passed many stations without arriving at any final destination.